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ABSTRACT

This report provides information about current research on at-risk students and describes the development of an at-risk program in an Oregon school district. After a preface and introduction, chapter 1 reviews current literature on students who are considered at risk of school failure. Issues explored include (1) student characteristics, (2) school characteristics, (3) a practical perspective on at-risk youth, (4) effective practices in secondary programs, and (5) incomplete guidelines for prevention at the elementary level. Chapter 2 looks at the development of Springfield's districtwide at-risk program, providing an overview of the district's philosophy and components of development. These include (1) support for prevention in the early years, (2) inservice activities, (3) needs assessment, (4) teacher cadres, (5) training materials for teachers, and (6) problems getting started. Chapter 3 describes the range of plans and activities being developed at the elementary level, utilizing interviews with a principal and a third-grade teacher to gain insight into various perspectives. Chapter 4 examines Project Excellence--a middle-school intervention program--and prevention programs at the high school level in the district. Included are 20 references, 3 tables, and a listing of interviews. (WTH)

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Springfield's Districtwide Prevention and Intervention Program for At-Risk Students

Julie De Pauw

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Preface

Recently, national attention has focused on youth who are at risk for failing in school and ultimately at risk for failing in life. Nationwide, agencies and groups are taking action on a variety of issues affecting youth, such as pregnancy, substance abuse, suicide, and dropping out of school. In the midst of all this activity, many educators are also recognizing that the current reform movement in education may be increasing the stress on young people who are already at risk for failure. Curriculum reforms and increasing demands by schools may have a negative impact on these students.

Like their counterparts across the nation, school districts in Oregon have become increasingly interested in meeting the needs of at-risk students. This Bulletin will give districts information about current literature on at-risk students as well as describe the development of Springfield School District's at-risk program, which has a strong preventative component at the elementary school level in addition to an emphasis on intervention in later grades.

Chapter 1 reviews current literature on students who are considered at risk for school failure. Given the lack of definitive research, the chapter presents a wide variety of viewpoints from current writers. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 profile Springfield's at-risk program, describing the philosophy and development of the districtwide program at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. It is hoped that this Bulletin will provide other districts with useful information for establishing their own programs for at-risk students.

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Philip K. Piele
Executive Secretary

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Introduction

The nation's educators, media, and business community are focusing on youth who are at risk of failing in school and ultimately at risk of failing in life. As Alina Tugend reported in a recent issue of *Education Week*, many agencies and groups nationwide are taking action on a variety of youth issues such as teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, youth suicide, and school dropouts. For example, the Carnegie Corporation formed a panel on issues of adolescence; the Education Commission of the States initiated a number of projects aimed at the at-risk teenager; and the National Education Association launched "Operation Rescue" by raising 1.7 million dollars to support programs aimed at reducing the dropout rate. To date, ten states have implemented specific dropout prevention programs and hundreds of local school districts are undertaking efforts to meet the needs of at-risk students.

The Challenge Facing School Districts

In the midst of all this activity many educators are recognizing that the current reform movement in education may be increasing the stress on young people who are already at risk of failure. In "School Reform and Potential Dropouts," Gary Natriello and his colleagues examine recommendations of the reform movement that fail to consider the impact on at-risk students. They cite research evidence showing that an increase in core curriculum requirements–a typical recommendation for reforming schools–will have little effect on the performance of students with low GPAs. In addition, the implementation of the new core curriculum will narrow the variation in school experiences. The likely result for potential dropouts is a restriction of "opportunity to engage in school activities that might afford them some sense of success," they state.

Natriello and his colleagues also question the effect of increased time demands on the potential dropout. Efforts to increase the length of the school day, assign more homework, and increase time spent on school tasks are likely to push at-risk students into choosing to leave school. It will be difficult to motivate at-risk students to spend additional time on school tasks that are already unrewarding. Such attempts may present them with "a severe conflict that may be most easily resolved by leaving school."

Kent McGuire, a policy analyst with the Education Commission of the States, suggests that dealing with the issues of at-risk students "represents a second and more difficult wave of school reform." McGuire, in his interview with Tugend, adds, "We see the problem as one that's growing. It's not just a function of poverty and minority status–although it affects that population most–but over time, we can show that the average kid is in one way or another at risk, given the issues he is dealing with in society in general."

Frank Newman and McGuire summarize the challenges facing school districts in addressing the needs of at-risk students. The first challenge they identify is the lack of good data about the at-risk population. Because there is no standard definition of school dropouts, reporting procedures vary widely from district to district. This lack of consensus concerning who is considered a dropout seriously impedes research efforts. Accurate and useful statistics are necessary to effectively define and establish effective practices.

Incomplete knowledge about effective responses to the problem is the second difficulty Newman and McGuire identify. They cite Dale Mann's comment that "virtually everything is being done . . . but we cannot yet tell to whom and with what effect." In an article in *Teachers College Record,* Mann points out that the upside of the array of programs is sincerity and creativity in the system but that the downside is chaos. Mann argues that it is imperative to develop better answers to the question "What works?" It is important to distinguish preventive from remedial interventions, he says, and to "apply a framework that captures the differences among programs that may be related to differences in outcomes." Mann points out that we need to know whether an effective at-risk program should work directly with students or whether the focus should be on staff or family or organizational factors.

The last challenge identified by Newman and McGuire is "confusion and disagreement about what schools can or should do for disadvantaged or troubled young people." It is time, they claim, for schools to rethink common school practices in terms of their unintended consequences for at-risk students and to assume leadership in meeting the needs of at-risk students. One demonstration of that leadership is for the school to establish collaborative relationships with community agencies.

The Focus of This Bulletin

Like their counterparts across the nation, school districts in Oregon have become increasingly interested in meeting the needs of at-risk students. This Bulletin will give districts information about current literature on at-risk students as well as describe the development of an at-risk program in an Oregon school district. Chapter 1 reviews current literature on students who are considered at risk of school failure. Given the lack of definitive research, the chapter presents a wide variety of viewpoints from current writers. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 profile an at-risk program being developed in the

Springfield School District. The chapters describe the philosophy and development of a districtwide preventive approach. It is hoped that this Bulletin will provide other districts with useful information for establishing their own programs for at-risk students.

Chapter 1

What Is Known about At-Risk Students?

Researchers and writers concerned with at-risk students have approached the issue from several different directions. Initially, much of the research explored factors in students' backgrounds that predispose them to dropping out of school. More recently, researchers have started to explore school processes that interact with student characteristics to further discourage and perhaps actually push students out of the system. In addition to exploring these two perspectives, this chapter also reviews the work of an author who has taken a very practical approach to working with at-risk youth. The chapter closes with a discussion of exemplary practices found in secondary school intervention programs. The lack of guidelines for preventive approaches and for programs at the elementary school level is also noted.

Student Characteristics

Much of the research and literature on school dropouts focuses on identifying common characteristics of those who drop out. The assumption behind this research, as Gary Wehlage and Robert Rutter explain, is that "a better understanding of the characteristics of dropouts will permit educators to develop policies and provide practices that will reduce the number of adolescents who fail to graduate."

In a profile of the potential dropout in the December 1985 *OSSC Bulletin*, Patrick O'Connor cites four characteristics of dropouts that are commonly found in the literature. First, an unsatisfactory relationship with family characterizes most dropouts. Lack of family cohesion creates a sense of insecurity for many students.

The second common characteristic is low socioeconomic status. O'Connor cites a study by Cervantes showing that as socioeconomic status diminishes, the incidence of dropping out increases dramatically. The mere absence of financial resources does not fully account for this correlation, however; instead, he says, the difference may be attributable to cultural

differences and the students' ability or willingness to conform to middle class values such as studying.

The third characteristic O'Connor lists is peer influence. "Those unhappy with the larger school environment form relationships with those who have similar dissatisfactions. These friendships perpetuate a cycle of dependency . . . . peer groups often provide the 'lost' student with a rationale for dropping out."

Finally, dropouts experience a low level of identification with the school. Feeling that they don't fit in, many potential dropouts do not participate in school-related and extracurricular activities.

In addition to these student characteristics, O'Connor mentions two indicators that school personnel frequently use to monitor behaviors associated with dropouts. One indicator is student attendance. O'Connor cites a study by Eugene Public Schools that suggests absenteeism in the ninth grade is a strong predictor of dropping out. The second indicator is student GPA and accumulation of credits. The Eugene study showed that prospective dropouts have substantially lower grades and accumulate fewer credits than do students who stay in school to graduate.

Additional family characteristics have been identified by other writers. In High School and Beyond, a longitudinal study of U.S. high school students sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics, data indicated that about half of all female dropouts leave school because of marriage and/or pregnancy. The data also suggested that a disproportionate number of students who drop out come from low-income, single-parent families and that many dropouts had mothers who worked outside the home and had low educational expectations for their children.

Citing work-related reasons for leaving school, Dale Mann, in an article in *Teachers College Record,* describes the situation as a push-pull problem; some students work out of family necessity and some are pulled by the lure of cash.

> Either way, being in paid employment poses a cruel choice for young people already at-risk. Given limited time and energy, schoolwork suffers . . . . Up to fourteen hours of paid employment a week, there is little effect. Fifteen to twenty-one hours a week increases the dropout rate by 50 percent; twenty-two hours a week increases the risk by 100 percent.

The socioeconomic background to dropping out is examined by Hilmar Wagner, who identifies four categories of reasons poor kids drop out. First, poor students "take jobs to support the family income when it isn't meeting basic needs for necessities such as housing, food, and clothing." Students who work after school have little time or energy left for homework or active participation in extracurricular school activities.

Another reason poor kids drop out, Wagner says, stems from their inability to compete materially with their classmates. Students want to dress in the same style as their peers, need money to participate in the extracurricular

activities, and need to purchase school supplies for many classes. Many poor students cannot keep pace with their classmates and therefore choose not to participate.

Parents' lack of educational aspirations for their children is the third category cited by Wagner. "Many parents in impoverished homes are forced through the desperateness of their day-to-day situation to become strictly present-oriented. The present is food, clothing and shelter, and not the niceties of school," he states. These parents are often distrustful of school because of their own school failure and they cannot see the value of education for their children.

Finally, poor kids quit school because they view the curriculum as irrelevant. According to Wagner, much of the curriculum in many high schools focuses on students who speak standard English well and are college bound. For many poor students this emphasis seems irrelevant and the answer is to quit school and do something that makes sense.

School Characteristics

A different approach to studying research on school dropouts has been taken by researchers Gary Wehlage and Robert Rutter. The results of research on student characteristics has been "negligible," they say, "because the focus on social, family, and personal characteristics does not carry any obvious implications for shaping school policy and practice." They point out that "the effect of such research may well be to give schools an excuse for their lack of success with the dropout."

Wehlage and Rutter outline a research agenda that would focus on understanding the institutional character of schools and how it affects dropouts. Information should be gathered, they say, on policies and practices that have negative impact on the potential dropout as well as on policies and practices that may reduce the likelihood that students will drop out. Their assumption is that this line of research will better enable schools to "create an environment in which these youth can experience some kind of success, find institutional participation rewarding, and develop aspirations for additional schooling that can lead to satisfying employment." It is essential, they insist, that educators understand how school affects and is perceived by different students in different ways.

Wehlage and Rutter began their review of institutional characteristics by examining data from the High School and Beyond study. Many tenth graders, as this study found, indicate their intentions not only to graduate from high school but to continue their education after graduation. Yet something undermines and discourages these expectations. One contributing factor may be the rigid way in which schools categorize students. Wehlage and Rutter argue that all students should receive the kind of attention that encourages them to pursue their aspirations.

Several of their findings indicate a "fundamental problem with the

perceived legitimacy of the institution." For example, a broad range of students, not just dropouts, view the effectiveness and fairness of the discipline system quite negatively. In addition, most students do not perceive that their teachers are interested in them. These findings are consistent across both noncollege-bound stayins and dropouts and and across racial groups. One variable related to school discipline that separated the stayins from the dropouts was a higher rate of inschool truancy. This higher rate of truancy often resulted in the dropouts having more serious encounters with the discipline system.

Wehlage and Rutter see these findings as "the tip of the iceberg, indicating institutional problems that go much deeper than dropouts." They believe that these three findings–the perception that the discipline system is ineffective and unfair, the perceived lack of teacher interest in students, and the presence of widespread truancy–have implications both for the degree of engagement of those who finish high school as well as for those who tend to drop out. When these factors interact with personal characteristics that put students at risk, Wehlage and Rutter argue that it is not unreasonable for students to become alienated. "The act of rejecting an institution as fundamental to society as school must also be accompanied by the belief that the institution has rejected the person." In sum, the dropout process, they state, is cumulative. It begins with negative messages about academic and discipline problems. These messages eventually evolve into concrete problems such as poor grades and insufficient credits.

Wehlage and Rutter make three recommendations based on their interpretation of the High School and Beyond data. First, they recommend greater accountability among educators toward all students. Professionals must work to establish equity in public schooling so that all students will receive personal and social benefits from their educational experience. Specific institutional mechanisms should be developed that define and monitor this accountability.

Second, Wehlage and Rutter recommend a renewed effort to establish legitimate authority within the institution. They see the problem of legitimate authority as an extension of the accountability issue. Many students do not believe that teachers care about them and are alienated from teachers in their high school years. To reestablish students' belief in the legitimacy of the institution, teachers must establish more personal and authentic relationships with students. In addition, the researchers say, the school program must be highly structured with clear but attainable expectations that address the problem of widespread truancy.

Their third recommendation is that school work and competence be redefined to allow a greater number of students to succeed. Academic subjects are important, but for many youth other domains are more stimulating and perhaps essential. The development of diverse opportunities for success may help to alter the view of many students who drop out saying, "School is not for me."

A Practical Perspective on At-Risk Youth

A school consultant who specializes in alternative education and dropout prevention has provided educators in the Pacific Northwest with a practical perspective and set of strategies to use in working with at-risk youth. Jerry Conrath identifies two groups of at-risk students–one the schools cannot significantly help and one the schools can indeed help.

One group of children live what Conrath calls "truly tragic lives." These children come to school with "problems that transcend the school system." This group includes victims of sexual and physical abuse, pregnant teens, addicts of drugs and alcohol, and children from families in extreme poverty. For Conrath, these problems cannot be solved by the school system; "the best the school can hope for is to make the classroom experience tolerable and decent."

Profile of Defeated Learners

Another group of students–those the schools *can* minister to, Conrath insists–are discouraged and defeated learners who come to believe through their school experiences that school is too demanding, confusing, unresponsive, or threatening. The discouraged learners' lack of self-confidence and self-worth lead them to feel helpless in dealing with school, he points out. Defeated and discouraged learners are also often distrustful of adults and institutions run by adults; therefore, it is difficult for the adults in schools to gain their trust. According to Conrath, this pattern of distrust and avoidance often results in many discouraged learners falling behind in academic skills. Their lack of academic skill development leads them to believe that they are "dumb" rather than unskilled. Since "dumbness" cannot be cured, the defeated learners believe they might as well give up.

Conrath describes discouraged learners as also having a "limited notion of the future." These learners will respond to short-run goals that bring immediate success but will not pursue long-range goals or projects. Their vision of the future is neither bright nor positive. In addition, Conrath describes these students as impatient with routine and lack of variety. Many of these at-risk students are "practical learners" who learn best through experiential and practical applications. As a result, many at-risk students have learning styles that are out of sync with the teaching styles of their teachers.

Fragile homes are also part of Conrath's profile of an at-risk youth. Challenging the assumption that single-parent homes are a contributing factor, Conrath believes the real issue is the quality of parenting. Many single parents provide strong role models, whereas many two-parent homes are weak and emotionally fragile. Conrath states that "often parents in these homes suffer similar characteristics: low skilled, low self-confidence, distrustful of institutions, avoidance, and suspicious of the future." Some parents may not

care or may be very frustrated by their child's discouragement and lack of interest. Often poverty is a major source of stress in fragile homes.

Perhaps the most significant factor that Conrath identifies in the profile of at-risk youth is the concept that most discouraged learners are externalizers. They do not see the relationship between effort and success, nor do they believe they have any control over events and outcomes, whether successes or failures. Therefore, success at school is due to good luck or easy work and failure is due to bad luck, teachers who refuse to help, or impossible work.

Strategies for Schools

For the at-risk students who meet the above profile, the "schools can bring a happy ending," Conrath argues. "The impending agenda for our schools," he states, "must be to improve conditions for learning and change the behaviors of both adults and students that cause some of our young to become discouraged and defeated learners." In his book *Our Other Youth*, Conrath outlines specific strategies that teachers and schools can use to meet the needs of at-risk youth.

A major theme in Conrath's work is diversity in learning and teaching. He identifies four basic preferred learning styles: analytical, intuitive, practical, and experiential. Teachers, he points out, tend to teach the way they themselves learn best. Information he has collected in the past few years highlights the discrepancy between the learning styles of teachers and the learning styles of at-risk students–those identified as slow, lowest achieving, or involved in the most conflicts with teachers. Some of these data, gathered from classroom teachers who have attended his workshops, are presented in table 1.

Table 1
Comparison of Learning Styles
of Teachers and At-Risk Students

	Teachers	*At-Risk Students*
Analytical	28%	10%
Intuitive	28%	17%
Practical	17%	51%
Experiential	27%	22%

To meet the needs of students most at-risk of school failure, teachers must expand their delivery and development of lessons to include all four learning styles. Conrath has developed lists of teacher and student

characteristics for each style and encourages teachers to experiment with strategies from each category. Such expansion of teaching styles, he recognizes, will be difficult, but he sees it as critical for "teachers who are determined to expand their invitations to succeed."

Conrath has also developed an extensive list of helpful and harmful adult behaviors. The most harmful reaction an adult can have is to patronize students and reinforce their notion that school is beyond their ability. Adults in schools may patronize these learners in a variety of ways. Conrath cites the "silent bargain"–"If you make no trouble for me, I'll make no trouble for you"–as a common response to the discouraged learner in secondary schools. Other adults may patronize discouraged learners by overdosing with "warm fuzzies," or overemphasizing incentives such as external rewards.

Among adult responses Conrath considers helpful is the need for adults to help students develop an internal sense of control. Teachers can help students who externalize by insisting on responsibility for both successes and mistakes, by emphasizing process and effort over product, and by emphasizing real cause-and-effect relationships. One of the most effective ways to help students gain a sense of responsibility is to focus on goal setting and goal attainment, he states.

Conrath is also very concerned about institutional factors that affect at-risk youth. The anonymity and impersonal nature of secondary schools are the aspects of the institution most frightening to defeated learners, he believes. Because anonymity breeds irresponsibility and avoidance, it is crucial that schools be personally and intellectually nonthreatening.

Effective Practices in Secondary Programs

Alternative programs designed to prevent secondary school students from dropping out have been in existence for some time. Stephen Hamilton reviewed evaluation studies of dropout prevention programs to identify the characteristics that seemed to make them effective. The first common feature he found is "the separation of potential dropouts from other students and their placement in programs that differ markedly from the ordinary high school experience." The second common characteristic of successful programs is a strong vocational emphasis. Students were offered curriculums that focused on practical, often job-related, skills.

A third common characteristic of effective dropout prevention programs, according to Hamilton, is utilization of out-of-classroom learning that may occur in connection with paid employment. The final characteristic he noted is the intensiveness of effective programs. They had "low student/teacher ratios, individualized instruction, strong counseling components, and small size."

Some additional characteristics of effective retention programs are cited by O'Connor. Such programs must be well-organized and advance realistic expectations, he says. The selection of appropriate staff is also crucial to the

success of such programs. Awareness of substance abuse is another factor built into many effective programs. And finally, O'Connor states that such programs select students who will voluntarily work within the structure of the program.

Incomplete Guidelines for Prevention at the Elementary Level

Many writers, claiming that a student's self-esteem and attitudes about learning and school are established in the elementary years, advocate starting prevention activities in the early grades. For example, Dale Mann writes, "The best way to avoid a high school dropout is to make the elementary school more successful. . . . The earlier we start, the less the damage and the greater the dividends."

Bob Cage and his colleagues outline six components of an elementary-level approach to prevention. Three of the six components focus on regular attendance and involvement of parents. Cage argues that nonattendance is highly related to poor achievement and ultimately to dropping out. Saying that parents may need to be counseled on how to reinforce their children's attendance at school, Cage recommends that schools initiate aggressive attendance policies and procedures that communicate the importance of regular attendance.

Schools should draw their elementary prevention strategies from the research findings on effective schools, says Richard Riley, who claims that the application of the effective schools research would yield positive outcomes for all students. In addition, he argues for high-quality, intensive preschool programs for at-risk children as the best way to help young children prepare for school.

Despite the interest in early prevention strategies, policy-makers and school districts interested in prevention are faced with a lack of concrete research and proven guidelines for effective practices to use in establishing programs for at-risk students in the elementary years. Districts must sort through a wide variety of approaches and opinions to develop policies and programs.

The efforts of one school district to develop a districtwide approach to meeting the needs of its at-risk students, including kindergarten through twelfth grade and using both prevention and intervention strategies, is the subject of the remainder of this Bulletin.

Chapter 2

Springfield Develops Its Districtwide At-Risk Program

This chapter provides a general overview of the philosophy and development of the districtwide components of Springfield School District's at-risk program. While the staff had been concerned about at-risk students for some time, in August 1986 they began their staff development training. Presently, the district is still in the process of defining the program's components. The following two chapters describe the developmental activities and initial efforts at training and program implementation.

The Program's Philosophy

In spring 1986, the Springfield District, like many other districts, set goals for the 1986-87 school year. One of their stated goals was "to devise strategies for improving student attendance and assisting with 'at-risk' students." Nancy Golden, assistant personnel director, describes several factors that influenced the development of this goal. A survey of suggested goals from the district's administrative staff identified the need to address at-risk students. The District Inservice Committee (composed of six elementary principals, two middle school principals, one high school principal, a resource teacher for at-risk students, the superintendent, assistant superintendent, personnel director, and assistant personnel director) also strongly recommended a districtwide focus on the needs of at-risk students. Moreover, a task force of middle school staff had formed and was focusing attention on the needs of middle school students who appeared to be "falling through the cracks."

Prevention and Intervention Components

Springfield's philosophy is unique in that it is focusing on at-risk students from both a prevention and an intervention framework. This dual focus has led the district to take a comprehensive approach, encompassing

kindergarten through twelfth grade. The focus of the elementary component is clearly preventative in nature. In the middle school program, intervention strategies are introduced along with continuted prevention efforts. By high school, many students have developed more serious problems that require an individualized approach.

Gary Kessler, resource teacher for the at-risk project, summarizes Springfield's philosophy as follows:

> It is our vision that working proactively with at-risk youth in the elementary grades will markedly decrease the numbers of at-risk youth in our middle and high schools. If we can intervene early in a child's educational experience to eliminate some of the early steps that tend to happen to kids who become at risk, we can reduce the numbers later on. Problems start building in the early grades.

Nancy Golden adds that it was important for district staff to realize from the beginning that this was not solely a high school problem. There is widespread support across the district for a strong prevention component aimed at the elementary grades. Louise Karther, principal at Elizabeth Page Elementary School, states,

> Our district has a compelling goal to reduce the number of dropouts. We are talking about students who are at-risk from the time they are in elementary school. These are the students with chronic absenteeism, defiance, and behavior problems. By concentrating on at-risk students at the elementary level, by creating a reason for the kids to be in school and to be in school longer, the at-risk students will begin to see themselves as successful. This can't help but reduce the dropout rate.

Frank Sullivan, school psychologist, sees the district's at-risk focus as an indication that the system is willing to adapt itself to meet the needs of kids who don't fit into a traditional academic program. Sullivan is concerned about the students who don't qualify for and don't need special education services but who end up falling through the cracks. He describes these students as intelligent but turned off to the system. At the elementary level, Sullivan sees at-risk students begin to lose their sense of individuality in a class of twenty-five students, to get systematically discouraged by school work because they lack necessary skills, and to begin engaging in other behaviors as a result of their frustration. Sullivan describes the at-risk focus as a way to develop a wider invitation for all children to succeed at their own pace in school.

Commitment to Mainstreaming

A second unique feature of Springfield's at-risk program is its commitment to a mainstreamed approach. The intent of the program is to

reach students in their regular classroom environments rather than in alternative educational settings. Golden comments, "Basically when students aren't succeeding in school, they are not succeeding in their regular classrooms. That is the setting in which we need to teach them how to function. Our feeling is that removing them from their classrooms is not the most effective way to reach them." Thus, the primary focus in the Springfield program is on strategies for the regular classroom teacher to use. The intervention components of the district's middle school program only remove students from regular classes for forty-five minutes each day.

The result of this mainstreamed, comprehensive, K-12 philosophy is a commitment to providing resources and training to the regular classroom teachers. The District Inservice Committee resolved to focus teacher training on strategies to improve students' self-concept as well as on strategies to improve essential learning skills. The development of the training focus was influenced by a needs assessment conducted in the district as well as by Springfield's synthesis of the research.

Support for Prevention in the Early Grades

Bob Hammond, coordinator for research, evaluation, and assessment, provided other administrators with a research perspective based on Benjamin Bloom's research and on his own evaluation experience. Bloom's research supports Springfield's early prevention approach to at-risk students, Hammond believes, citing Bloom's findings reported in *Stability and Change in Human Characteristics* and Bloom's recent comments in *Education Week* as support for focusing on elementary students.

According to Bloom, children enter first grade grouped together in their self-concept. However, as they progress to the higher grades, the top 20 percent in terms of achievement increase in self-concept, whereas the bottom 20 percent decrease in self-concept. As these students enter high school, the gap in self-concept may be so large that it may be too late to change it. Agreeing with Bloom, Hammond argues that the early years are the most critical; if the battle for essential learning skills is not won before fifth grade, students are automatically placed at risk for school failure.

Supporting Hammond's perspective is an experience in the Springfield district. Achievement data showed that two groups of Springfield students began falling behind in computational skills at around the third grade. When these groups entered middle school, the teachers became very concerned about their low skills and implemented an intensive program to remediate the students' deficits. Followup testing showed that the remedial program produced changes in mathematical concepts and applications but failed to improve students' computational skills. "In other words," he said, "with all this effort, we still lost this group of students."

Thus, to avoid trouble in middle and high schools, students must

acquire essential learning skills and self-concept in the earlier grades. Both the research literature and Hammond's own experience with evaluation agree that a focus on prevention in the early grades is critical.

Inservice Activities

After Nancy Golden became Springfield's assistant personnel director in July 1986, one of her first responsibilities was to collaborate with the Inservice Committee to develop and implement the district's at-risk goal. Resources to support building-level activities were included in the budget, but the district had not fully developed an implementation plan. The district had committed to intervention counselors for the high schools, an additional counselor at each middle school, two at-risk teachers for a pilot program at the middle schools, and counselor aides in the elementary schools. In addition, the district planned to assign a teacher who would be returning from leave midsemester to assist with the at-risk project. The Inservice Committee was charged with the responsibility of developing a training plan for all the teachers in the district.

Golden decided to start the school year by scheduling an inservice for administrators in mid-August. Because she felt that building-level people wanted practical information on how an at-risk focus could help in their buildings, Golden invited speakers who could provide the administrators with clear examples of programs that were already operational.

The morning session focused on building a common knowledge base for administrators. Virginia Schwartzrock, principal at Santa Clara Elementary School in the Eugene School District, presented a mentoring system that she had implemented for at-risk students. Katy McCarney, administrative assistant at Madison Middle School, also in Eugene, shared an attendance club program developed to reduce attendance problems. Linda Bolton and Linda Potter, teachers in Eugene, gave an overview of their high school program for at-risk youth. Frank Sullivan and Barbara Long discussed the plans developed over the summer for the pilot program for Springfield middle schools. Results of a recent survey of promising practices in the Northwest were shared by Andrea Baker, a youth specialist from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. Golden also reviewed Benjamin Bloom's research with the administrators.

In the afternoon, Golden planned small-group discussion sessions. These sessions gave administrators the opportunity to begin to plan activities for the rest of the year. The small groups also discussed the development of a working definition of at-risk students, and they set goals by building levels.

An inservice program for all district staff was also planned by the Inservice Committee during the August inservice week. Jerry Conrath, the presenter, gave a motivational speech that focused on increasing awareness of and empathy for at-risk students' needs. Conrath's speech received an

overwhelmingly positive response and generated enthusiasm and support for solutions to the problems of at-risk students.

Needs Assessment

The inservice speech by Jerry Conrath was followed up with building-level discussions in each school in the district. These discussions served as a needs assessment that would be used in the development of building level plans.

Golden asked the building staffs to respond to four questions. The first question asked staffs to define at-risk youth in the context of their own schools. Building staffs identified a broad range of contributing factors including academic deficits, behavior problems, victims of circumstances, and home environment.

Personnel were then asked to identify building goals for at-risk youth. Goals identified included additional programs, curriculum changes, staff development plans, attendance plans, advocacy programs, self-esteem and social skills training, parent involvement, improved identification procedures, and development of teaching strategies.

The third question directed building staffs to describe what had been done in their buildings in the past to meet the needs of the at-risk youth. Major activities described included use of support staff, additional support programs, incentive programs, and utilization of community resources.

Suggestions about what could be done in the future to meet the needs of at-risk youth was the focus of the last question. The response to this question generated an extensive list of creative ideas that fell into general categories such as additional programs, staff development, incentives, attendance, staff communications, positive attitude, and teaching strategies.

Golden compiled these data into a report that summarized the main themes that emerged from the needs assessment. The data indicated that the district staff were skilled at using support services such as counselors, specialists, and community resources to meet the needs of at-risk students. The needs assessment also identified a number of effective ways of providing support systems for at-risk youth. However, few ideas or suggestions referred to specific techniques that could be used by classroom teachers, though teachers clearly indicated a need for such techniques.

The Inservice Committee for the district reviewed the compiled data and decided to make the development of specific techniques for classroom teachers a focal point for training during the year. In addition, the committee decided to form a cadre of classroom teachers to serve as an ongoing task force. This cadre would help the district develop specific, concrete strategies for addressing the needs of at-risk students and would help train other teachers in their own buildings.

Golden also used the results of both the district needs assessment and

the administrators' inservice discussions to develop a district definition of at-risk youth. Springfield defines an at-risk youth as possessing all or some of the following descriptors, which vary by school level. The descriptors are comprehensive but allow for teacher judgment of individual student's needs.

Elementary School Descriptors

1. Begins school with few or no readiness skills
2. Has some peer problems
3. Begins to perceive of himself or herself as academically low
4. Produces low academically
5. Has increasingly more frequent absences
6. Comes from a home where education has a low priority
7. Comes from a home with poor parenting skills
8. Is a victim of abuse (verbal and/or physical)
9. Is an avoider
10. Lacks "*skills*," not "smarts"
11. Is not a student normally served by special services program
12. Comes from a low economic background (total poverty)

Middle School Descriptors

1. Is frequently absent
2. Is a drug and/or alcohol abuser
3. Has a "What good is school?" attitude
4. Begins to believe "I'm dumb" and that it's only "good luck" or "bad luck" that is responsible for successes or failures
5. Needs structured environment
6. Has a sense of personal impotency or helplessness
7. Distrusts adults
8. Has no patience for routine, long-time sitting and listening
9. Is a "practical," hands-on learner

High School Descriptors: Most of the above plus (possibly):

1. Does not earn enough credits to graduate
2. Involved with the juvenile court system

Cadre

Formed in October as a result of the Inservice Committee's review of the needs assessment, the teacher cadre was made up of one classroom teacher from each elementary school, one classroom teacher from each middle school

in addition to the at-risk teachers, and three teachers from various departments at each high school. The emphasis in selection, which was done by the principal at each school, was on regular classroom teachers. Because the cadre's purpose was to develop specific, practical ideas for the classroom teacher, it was decided this could be best accomplished by teachers themselves.

When Golden began to look for people who could provide training for the cadre, she experienced difficulty. The few consultants who were working with at-risk youth focused on ancillary services or alternative educational programs aimed primarily at secondary students. Golden also had difficulty finding a consultant who could be specific about what regular classroom teachers could do on a daily basis in a classroom of twenty-five students. In the end, the district decided to invite Jerry Conrath back to do a two-day inservice for cadre members, because the Inservice Committee believed he had the most practical experience with at-risk youth. It was planned that the cadre would use Conrath's approach and materials as a basis for developing suggestions for concrete activities that classroom teachers could use at the various grade levels.

In early December Conrath presented three sessions to the cadre and building principals. The first session focused on strategies for preventing learning defeat. Conrath presented profiles of discouraged learners and addressed helpful and harmful adult behavior in raising self-esteem. Session two focused on how to teach to student diversity. Session three addressed how to work with difficult kids to prevent learning discouragement.

The next item on the cadre's agenda was to adapt Conrath's materials to elementary, middle, and high school levels. The cadre hoped to provide teachers with concrete strategies that could be easily integrated in their everyday curriculum rather than create a separate curriculum.

The current plan is for the cadre teachers to adapt the training materials to their own buildings. Each building is required to have six hours of inservice focused on at-risk youth by the end of this school year. The inservice will be planned by the building principal and the teacher cadre member in consultation with staff. The training materials that are being adapted from Jerry Conrath's work will provide a general framework with specific strategies, but each building will have flexibility to focus on the topics of greatest interest to their staffs.

Springfield is clearly committed to a long-term focus on at-risk youth and is committed to prevention at the regular classroom level. Once the cadre completes the six hours of inservice training, the district will focus on collaboration with outside agencies to meet the needs of at-risk youth.

Training Materials for Teachers

Gary Kessler, the resource teacher for the at-risk project, is developing

training materials to be used by cadre members in their buildings. As a teacher advocate, Kessler is very sensitive to the pressures of added curriculum. "Teachers need strategies that can pervade what exists in the classroom now. It will be easier for both the teacher and the kids in the long run," he says.

Kessler has divided the training materials into six units. Each unit will be accompanied by ready-to-use overheads and handouts that suggest practical strategies for teachers. Kessler is also working with several cadre teachers to develop videotapes that demonstrate the use of various strategies. Additionally, each of the six units will have a different content for elementary, middle, and high school level. The intent is to take the general concepts and make them very specific so that implementation in the classroom is enhanced.

The following outline of topics has been proposed by Kessler for building level training:

1. *Identification*–What are these kids like and what do they need to succeed?

2. *Harmful Adult Behaviors*–What behaviors have teachers used in the past that continue to discourage these kids?

3. *Helpful Adult Behaviors*–What can a teacher do that is constructive in the classroom?

4. *Teaching and Learning Styles*–Teaching tips to deal with the differences of preferred learning styles

5. *Changing At-Risk Behavior/Goal Setting*–Describe problematic behaviors and give strategies to deal with them, including how to set goals that are appropriate for the age level of the student

6. *References and Guidelines*–General and specific guidelines to remember when dealing with at-risk students

An additional area that Kessler sees as important for teachers to be aware of and develop increased sensitivity to is the area of home-school relationships. Kessler believes that many of the at-risk students come from homes that are alienated from the school system for a wide variety of reasons. Perhaps the parents cannot read, are afraid of teachers, or had negative school experiences themselves. Many of the parents need special approaches from teachers to feel comfortable discussing their children's education. By middle school, Kessler points out, many of the parents of these at-risk students are defeated and reluctant to get involved in the school program. Kessler feels that teachers need suggestions for alternative strategies to deal with the parents of these students.

Because of the distinct needs of each school, these materials will be used

in different ways from building to building. Each building will choose to emphasize different parts. Kessler says the district sets general goals and develops a basic set of concepts to utilize in problem-solving, but is sensitive to the differences in the schools and encourages building-based implementation of the training materials.

Upon request, Kessler and Golden will be available to assist cadre members with the building-level inservice activities. Kessler is also available as a resource to individual teachers who have particular concerns about a student and need some assistance.

In addition to developing training materials, Kessler is working on grant writing to tap into additional sources of funding for at-risk projects next year. Kessler is responsible for working with a number of community agencies to coordinate community resources that will be made available to at-risk families.

To build teacher awareness, Kessler publishes a monthly newsletter that focuses on at-risk program activities in the district. Kessler's philosophy is that the more communication that is going out, the more comfortable teachers will be with what is happening. It is a plus, he believes, that the newsletter comes from a fellow teacher. Kessler gathers material for the newsletter from a variety of sources including news clippings, other teachers, reports from conferences, and updates on district planning. For example, the December issue contained an article that focused on the impact of the holiday season on at-risk students and their families. In the future, Kessler plans to feature a different school in each issue, describing the specifics of each school's building plan, goals, and activities as well as sharing specific strategies developed by teachers.

Problems Getting Started

Implementation of any program encounters a variety of problems, some forseeable, others not. Springfield's program for at-risk students is no exception. Golden identifies the timing of the needs assessment at the beginning of the year as one challenge. Although the needs assessment served as an effective vehicle to mobilize and focus building staffs on the needs of at-risk students, problems in providing adequate resources to support the identified needs also resulted from the timing. Such timing is out of sync with the budget planning cycle and may result in a gap between needs and budgeted resources for that school year. Golden believes that if districts conduct a needs assessment at the beginning of the school year, they must be prepared to be flexible and creative in developing the needed resources to support the ideas that are generated by the needs assessment process.

Kessler points to a lack of variety in the consulting end as a problem. It has been especially difficult to find a consultant with an elementary orientation. Finding consultants who have practical strategies to offer classroom teachers has also been problematic. Many consultants either specialize in offering

ancillary services or in alternative secondary programs.

In the absence of readily available consultation and existing programs to consider for adoption, the district has had to build much of its program from scratch. Because little material was available about how to implement a preventive approach for at-risk students starting in elementary schools, training at the building level didn't start until February. Believing it would have been better to initiate the training at the beginning of the year, Golden recommends that other districts do this. So that other districts do not have to start from scratch in developing training programs, she has offered to share the results of Springfield's efforts.

Another problem relates to the commitment by the district to provide six hours of training to every teacher in the district. Golden states that for several reasons Springfield was not able to provide release time to entire school staffs for training. Consequently, "We are asking teachers to add another thing to their already overloaded schedules," Golden comments. "The training must happen during preparation time after a full school day. Our goal is that the inservice will be good enough that they will feel like the time is justified. We want to give teachers practical strategies that they can use immediately in the classroom, so they will value the time spent on training."

Kessler describes skepticism as a hurdle he has had to overcome in his talks with some teachers. Many teachers viewed the at-risk focus as this year's bandwagon. Kessler shares that it has been difficult to convince them that this is not just a "flash in the pan but a long-term commitment to improvement. The only way to convince them is to make it a reality over time."

Chapter Three

Prevention Activities at the Elementary School Level

This chapter and the next describe the range of plans and activities being developed at some of the buildings in the district. Here both a principal and a third-grade teacher at the elementary level share their perspective on developing programs for at-risk students.

Building Plans

A key activity that followed the district inservice speech by Jerry Conrath was the development of building-level plans. As part of the needs assessment, each building staff was directed to begin to develop goals and activities that focused on the individual needs of the at-risk student population at their school.

Each school's plan was to include several facets, explains Louise Karther, principal at Elizabeth Page Elementary School. In conjunction with the At-Risk Cadre, each building was to plan and complete six hours of inservice by the end of this school year. The building plans were also to include specific plans for helping classroom teachers develop strategies to use within the classroom. In addition, each plan was to include a focus on improving attendance. The district decided that attendance had to be an important part of building plans because nationally poor attendance has been identified as a strong predictor of eventually dropping out. Parents and the community at large have lost a sense of the importance of education and need to realize that children cannot learn if they do not attend school regularly, she says. Therefore, buildings were to develop strategies that would help students arrive at school on time and stay in school.

Additional facets of building plans might deal with areas not directly related to classroom instruction. At the elementary level, the entire family is often at risk. Because many of these parents lack the knowledge or resources to adequately care for their children, directing families with basic needs in

nutrition and clothing to community resources that can assist them in meeting these needs might be an additional building goal. In sum, Karther explains, an effective at-risk plan needs to consider the wide range of needs that are represented among at-risk students and their families.

In addition to six hours of training and a focus on classroom strategies and attendance, each building staff was encouraged to tailor their plan to their own community setting. What works at one school might fail miserably at another. For example, Karther describes the neighborhood around Page Elementary as fairly stable, allowing the Page staff to focus on students' problems from a long-term perspective. In buildings with high student turnover, however, staff may need to focus on short-term goals. They may need to plan for smaller, quick successes because of the frequent turnover. Giving another example, Karther points out that, although many of the families in the community suffer from problems such as economic stress and lack of resources, the ways families approach these problems differ from neighborhood to neighborhood. Thus each building must be allowed the flexibility to be responsive to the particular needs of their students and families.

A strong supporter of the district's focus on at-risk students, Karther insists that "the focus is critical because we have so many, many students at risk for many different reasons–even at our more stable schools. If we don't begin here to make changes in the lives of these children, the problems compound."

Example of an Elementary Building Plan

The teachers at Page are extremely supportive and willing to spend the extra time and effort needed to help the at-risk students in their building, says Karther. After responding enthusiastically to the inservice session by Jerry Conrath, the staff returned to the building to brainstorm and generate a list of ideas to implement at Page.

An immediate and important spinoff of the Conrath workshop at Page was the revision by staff of the building's discipline model. Staff had expressed some concern in the previous spring about their discipline plan. The Conrath inservice served as the impetus to make immediate changes. An entire category of minor infractions was eliminated, and alternative ways of dealing with the less serious negative behaviors were developed. The revised discipline model now restricts formal disciplinary referrals to major offenses such as obscenity and open defiance.

Karther said the revised discipline policy has had several positive effects.

> It removed a big burden from the kids of having to be so concerned about so many little things all the time. It has paid big dividends by changing the way

> we approach resolution of problems, by not making a big deal of a little problem. We still remind students of safety rules but running is not a disciplinary referral.

Karther and the building's cadre teacher have started to plan Page's six hours of inservice. The first inservice, in late January, was intended to build awareness of what students need as they enter middle school. Barbara Long, a middle school at-risk specialist, shared her perspective on what places a student at risk during middle school years. Karther admits this may be an unusual place to begin, but feels it was important for staff to understand what kids should be able to do when they enter middle school.

The remaining inservice hours at Page will build on intervention strategies for staff. Karther points out that teachers at Page will need time to become more aware of their own preferred learning style and teaching style. After developing this awareness, additional effort and preparation time will be required for them to develop lesson plans, activities, and materials that will address students' wide range of learning styles.

An attendance club is another part of Page's building plan. Because only five students at Page are chronic truants, each has been assigned a staff member who offers praise, support, and encouragement when he or she is at school. The goal of these contact people is to communicate to students that they are personally interested in them and notice when the students are not at school. Because the major attendance concern at Page is a high rate of tardiness, the attendance club is developing planning skills and incentives to encourage students to arrive at school on time.

The Neighborhood Watch Association, a community group, has also become involved in Page's at-risk project. The association has offered to provide special assistance to children and families in need when other funds have been exhausted; this help includes new clothing, payment of medical costs, and scholarships for recreational programs. Because the school's resources are limited, Karther says the Page staff are delighted to have additional funds available for the needs of at-risk students through the support of a neighborhood group.

Karther identifies lack of time to plan and develop programs for at-risk students as a major problem. She has attempted to carefully manage staff communications so that staff meetings could be devoted to planning and discussions on the at-risk focus.

> It is critical to plan creatively so teachers have quality time to work on both the development of awareness of the needs of at-risk students and on the planning. Once the initial planning is done, you can implement and train with smaller chunks of time along the way, but you have to have good chunks of time to use for creative thinking in the beginning.

She encourages administrators and teachers to "select what you can succeed with and do it well. The problems will continue to be here in spite of

our best plans. We can never eliminate it–only hope to lessen it." Identifying a part of the at-risk problem that can be successfully addressed at school is important, says Karther.

An Elementary Teacher's Perspective

Karen Asai is a third-grade teacher at Springfield's Mohawk Elementary School and a member of the At-Risk Cadre. She is working with Gary Kessler and two other teachers to develop a series of videotapes that will demonstrate specific techniques to use in the classroom. Like many other people in the district, Asai is very enthusiastic about the focus on at-risk students and the long-term commitment of the district to the project. Asai says, "I don't see this district as 'doing at-risk' this year and saying, 'What's new next year?' I see this as a beginning. Let's learn what works and do it. I also see a tremendous sensitivity to teacher needs."

Asai is enthusiastic about the concept of the teacher cadre:

> My dream is teachers learning from teachers. I believe such learning is the least threatening and has the highest carryover to the classroom. There is so much ability in our district, we need to tap all those resources and develop an opportunity for sharing. I see the at-risk focus as an opportunity to create teacher growth.

She is also pleased to see the district taking a developmental approach that is responsive to the expressed needs of teachers and that recognizes students' needs differ from building to building.

Awareness, Compassion, and Teamwork

In attempting to conceptualize her own thinking about meeting the needs of at-risk students, Asai has coined the acronym ACT, which stands for Awareness, Compassion, and Teamwork, principles that form the foundation of effective approaches for helping at-risk students. For Asai, awareness encompasses an understanding of both learning styles and students' affective needs as well as recognizing the common characteristics of an at-risk person. "Helping an at-risk person means reaching out, going the extra mile when people need it, developing sensitivity to people's needs." She said that Springfield's superintendent, Paul Plath, spearheaded the focus of awareness on at-risk youth at the beginning of the school year by showing that everyone is at-risk at some time.

Asai describes compassion as the positive attitude that teachers must develop toward all children in order to reach them. She firmly believes that "kids are really doing the best they can with the facts they have at the time. If they misbehave, they have misconceptions about how best to fulfill their wants

and needs. It's our job to teach students how to get what they need without preventing others from doing the same." Because 80 percent of the communication between teachers and children is nonverbal, a teacher must develop genuine compassion to really reach at-risk students. Awareness and saying the right words are not enough to communicate effectively. "If your words say I care but your face and body don't, it won't work," she asserts.

If a teacher realizes that even a disruptive child is doing his or her best at that moment, a shift in perspective occurs that allows the teacher to view the situation in a new light. With a positive, compassionate frame of reference, teachers can not only help a child to want to change but also help them compensate for learning style deficits and weak modalities. Asai states that the key is to "put a child in a nurturing environment where deficits are accepted yet where the child is taught to appreciate strengths and work upon weaknesses with courage."

Asai describes the importance of teamwork up and down the line of people involved in the schools. It is critical for a teacher to "reach awareness of what at-risk students need and then to let them know that the two of you are a team to reach common goals." Asai believes the spirit of unity and teamwork must pervade the system. At the beginning of the year, Superintendent Plath communicated a sense of unity between teachers and administrators in working for the good of the district's students. Asai believes that this sense of unity must be carried back to the classroom so that the teacher and students work as a team to achieve the goals set for the year. The teacher needs to develop a supportive atmosphere for all students by teaching them caring responses so that they know how to support one another.

Cognitive and Affective Elements

With ACT as a foundation, Asai then describes a two-pronged approach to developing classroom strategies for at-risk children. She believes that the strategies developed must blend cognitive with affective elements. Translating these "lofty ideas" into concrete actions appropriate at the various grade levels will be a major challenge for the cadre and for the district's teachers. In addition to the material given to the cadre by Jerry Conrath, Asai has attempted to integrate the cognitive and affective elements into the demonstration videotapes she is working on.

Cognitive elements deal with the delivery of factual information. Important aspects of the cognitive domain that should be covered in training include concrete information on learning styles such as the auditory, kinesthetic, and visual learners; multisensory teaching; and how to teach to the hands-on, practical learner. Asai believes that learning styles are the key to teaching at-risk kids. A teacher should present "multisensory lessons to the whole group and then not only reteach to the students who are having difficulty through their strength modality, but also teach how to compensate

for weaker modalities." A teacher does not have to know the style of every student but should be aware of the preferred learning styles of the four to five students who are having the greatest difficulty.

According to Asai, it is also critical for teachers to be aware of their own preferred learning style. This self-awareness of preferred learning style is crucial to allow the teacher to consciously teach to other learning styles.

Affective elements of Asai's two-pronged approach include the activities and interactions that are aimed at building self-esteem, self-awareness, goal-setting skills, willingness to try, the courage to make mistakes, and understanding of cause and effect. The affective component attempts to change the attitudes of at-risk students. "If I view my role as only passing knowledge and facts, then I'm only doing one-fourth of the task. We need to reach not just the intellectual child but also the emotional, physical, and social." Asai wants to give the at-risk student a sense of hope and the courage to try. Once a student tries, the teacher can reward the effort and create new success experiences for these discouraged learners. Students must get rid of negative thoughts, she says, and begin to believe in themselves to achieve success and to take responsibility for their own success and failure.

The creative challenge for Asai lies in trying to create lessons and a classroom environment that tie the affective and cognitive elements together without adding new curriculum to an already full schedule. In meeting this challenge, Asai firmly believes it is important to develop teacher awareness of the different cognitive and affective needs of students and to communicate these concepts in a concrete way that youngsters will understand.

Metaphors, bibliotherapy, and bulletin board displays have all been used by Asai in her classroom. For example, the Winnie the Pooh characters illustrate learning styles and the discouraged learner. After explaining the varieties of learning styles of her class, she asked the students to analyze the styles of each character. Kanga is the visual learner who could sit and study for a long time, Tigger is the kinesthetic learner who has to do something to learn, and Eyeore is the discouraged learner. After the discussion, students wrote ideas in their journal about how to encourage a student who feels like Eyeore. Asai might next attempt to reinforce the concepts in a visual way by using a bulletin board display.

Teachers can be at risk, also. "There is always too much to do. Each teacher must assume personal responsibility to stay happy," says Asai. Self-awareness and balance are the keys. "It is important to keep your job in perspective. The teachers who haven't learned to keep balance in their lives are at risk." Once teachers are at risk, they will find it difficult to meet the needs of at-risk students. For herself, Asai maintains her own sense of balance and perspective by remembering, "I can't change the world in one day, so I will be effective today."

Chapter 4

Intervention Programs at the Middle and High Schools

The first section of this chapter describes the development and implementation of Project Excellence, a program being implemented in Springfield's middle schools. In the second section, an administrator explains the focus of the prevention program at the high school level.

At the Middle Level, Project Excellence

The middle school intervention program, Project Excellence, is currently the most developed component of Springfield's at-risk program. Intervention, which begins at the middle school level, is blended with continued prevention efforts. Golden says some of the impetus for the district's overall at-risk program was due to the efforts of this group of middle school people who identified and were concerned about a group of kids who were falling through the cracks.

Project Excellence grew out of lunchtime discussions among Don Buckley, Springfield Middle School principal; Jeff Davis, administrative assistant at Springfield Middle School; and Barbara Long, at-risk specialist for Springfield and Hamlin Middle Schools. Long explains that the district has a "large population, conservatively 33 percent of the total, who are bright, capable kids but who for a combination of factors–personal experiences, socioeconomic status, family problems–are intimidated by the public school system. They don't see the learning process as an opportunity." Eventually these lunchtime conversations evolved into a middle school task force that, during summer 1986, developed a model for implementation of a pilot intervention program designed to help these kids at the middle school level.

Several concerns led the middle school group to the development of Project Excellence. Jane Broderick, counselor at Springfield Middle School, initially tried to help the at-risk students with more typical counseling approaches. At one time she worked with a group of at-risk students on a daily basis using contracts and progress reports to try to help the students get

organized at school, but these efforts were largely unsuccessful. The students were certainly in need of the extra attention and pats on the back, but it was not enough to help change the behaviors that were contributing to their predicament. To be more successful in school, the students were in need of specific skill development and curriculum intervention.

Their concern for at-risk students was great, Davis says, because "middle school is the point where young students begin to drop out. We see seventh and eighth graders quit coming to school and begin to get involved in drugs, alcohol, and sexual experimentation." At-risk students also often experience middle school as more intimidating than elementary school because of its size, structure, noise, and activity. "These kids are alienated–they don't have a sense that teachers care, they expect to be refused by teachers. They make the assumption that no one cares."

Project Excellence developed from these concerns into a summer workshop that included Davis, Broderick, and Long as well as Frank Sullivan and Pat Reinker, school psychologists, and Susan Stoops and Susan Kinsley, middle school teachers. This group developed the proposal that defined Project Excellence, including its philosophy, goals, suggested curriculum, a hierarchy of skills, entrance and exit criteria, and a five-year plan for program development. Working with a limited budget, they had to set priorities for their goals.

Focus on 'Invisible Students'

One of the first decisions of the task force was to determine whom the program would try to help. Long describes Project Excellence as unusual because it is geared to "the invisible students who were not in trouble but were also not living up to their potential and who were falling through the cracks of the system." Several factors led the task force to focus on seventh graders in the pilot program. Seventh grade is the transition year for students–the year they move out of the tightness of their home rooms in sixth grade. In addition, because academic skills become increasingly important in the seventh grade, students' frustration increases.

Another factor in the decision to focus on seventh graders is that the middle school staff already had one year to learn about and get to know these students and were thus better able to identify who might benefit. The final factor was the developmental and maturational level of the students. The task force felt that the seventh graders would be more open to change and have fewer negative experiences to overcome than ninth or tenth graders. Guidelines for admission to the program were then defined (see table 2).

Table 2
Guidelines for Entry into At-Risk Program

1. Seventh-grade student
2. No more than one year below grade level in basic skills as measured by building testing procedures
3. CAT scores of 4th stanine or above
4. Grade point average of 2.5 or lower
5. Failure to meet minimum state attendance requirements
6. Learning factors not the primary cause of low achievement
7. Disciplinary referrals within the norm for the school
8. History of dysfunctional peer relations
9. Parent commitment to program
10. Student commitment to program

The task force also decided to make Project Excellence an enrichment program instead of an alternative education program. Students spend one period a day with the at-risk specialist in their school and participate in the regular program for the rest of the day. During the period that they are in the Project Excellence class, the focus includes study skills, social skills, intrapersonal skills, and life skills. These strands are blended and woven into a year-long scope and sequence.

Selection of Students

The first hurdle the task force had to face was the selection of the students for the program. Long and Linda Johnston, at-risk specialist for Thurston and Briggs Middle Schools, provided an inservice session for teachers to explain the program and the identification process. Teachers at each school quickly identified twenty-eight to thirty students for consideration. Although the task force had developed guidelines for entry into the program, Johnston and Long needed to develop an additional rating scale that weighted the various factors to assist in the final selection of students. Initially there were only twelve openings at each school.

Johnston and Long met with parents and students to assess their interest and willingness to be involved in the program for the whole year. Then a screening committee was formed at each school to select the final group of students. The screening committee was composed of the principal, vice principal, counselor, and an at-risk specialist. One criterion that Long and Johnston will include in next year's screening process is consideration of potential group dynamics. Johnston states that assessing "how these ten people are going to work as a group is difficult to do but it is important to try."

At the program's beginning in October 1986, Johnston and Long's initial goals were to carefully develop group cohesion, to develop a safe, encouraging environment, and to develop strong, positive bonding between teachers and students. Long emphasizes that the at-risk student needs to experience the teacher as approachable and caring. Bonding, says Johnston, is the process of "winning the kids over to come to see you as a caring person who will listen to them." Johnston also sees the development of group atmosphere as critical in the beginning.

Development of Curriculum

As the groups at each of the four middle schools began to coalesce, Johnston and Long incorporated into their lesson plans strands from the skills hierarchy outlined by the task force. The study skills strand focuses on organization, time management, homework completion, and inclass work completion. Also included with the study skills are test-taking techniques, what students are to do if they don't understand lectures or readings, how to learn, and memory skills. The social skills strand focuses on interpersonal communication, values clarification, trust building, and handling conflict. Intrapersonal skills focus on self-awareness, goal setting, monitoring, coping with stress, and enhancing self-esteem. Handling family conflict, substance abuse prevention, community awareness, and leisure skills are the focus of the life skills strand.

The lack of district-adopted curriculum in these skill areas meant that Johnston and Long had to develop appropriate activities and lesson plans. For Long, the challenge lay in taking an abstract human development concept such as making choices and developing it in a concrete way that made sense for "kids who don't abstract well in the best of circumstances. These kids respond to the idea of making choices and accepting consequences with beliefs such as it will never work, it is not like that, and it won't make a difference anyway."

Recently the district adopted Quest Study Skills for Adolescents to fill the curriculum void in this program. According to Johnston, Quest was selected because its goals, objectives, and content matched the scope and sequence hierarchy developed by the middle school task force. The preventative orientation of Quest is also congruent with the district's overall philosophical approach. In addition, Johnston cites the design of the lesson plans, which follow Madeline Hunter's ITIP approach, as a strength of Quest. This approach to lesson design is "what students need for enhancement and retention of learning," she says. Long adds that the conceptual and vocabulary level of the materials seem well-designed for at-risk students who have difficulty with abstract ideas. The workbook developed for both students and parents is also impressive, says Long.

In addition to the Project Excellence class period, Long and Johnston daily spend one hour and fifty minutes at each school to plan curriculum and to

work with parents and consult with teachers, administrators, and community contacts. Johnston calls parents regularly to communicate with them. "We're a team to do what's best for your child. What do you think is the best plan? How do you think you can help?" Johnston believes it is important to communicate to parents that they do have influence with their child. Long notes that many of these parents are delighted to hear something good about their children from the school. They have usually heard nothing but discouraging feedback for six years and are pleased to have someone recognize the children's potential.

Monitoring Students' Progress

Johnston and Long use a weekly monitoring sheet with teachers to track the progress and problems of their students in other classes. Teachers use the monitoring sheet to check students' completion of work, missing assignments, preparedness for class, appropriate classroom behavior, and tardiness. Through frequent informal contact with teachers, Johnston and Long stay on top of potential problems and communicate students' special needs to teachers. It is important, says Johnston, to point out the small improvements to teachers–improvement that, though almost unnoticeable, are very significant for the at-risk student.

At the very beginning of the program, it is important for teachers and administrators to come to an agreement about who is responsible for what kinds of problems when things go wrong for a student. It is critical for those involved to know ahead of time who should handle what and when. The at-risk specialist cannot play the hatchet person when problems arise. "The at-risk teacher should be a support, the person kids can come to with problems and questions when they need help," says Johnston.

The Evaluation Plan

Project Excellence, considered a pilot program this year, is being evaluated carefully. Frank Sullivan helped the task force develop a list of important indicators of success that are being monitored. Jeff Davis is responsible for the collection of the data, which will be reviewed and evaluated by the Research and Evaluation Department to summarize and determine the results. The outline of the evaluation plan is included in table 3.

The first set of data has been collected after ten weeks of program implementation. Informal responses from teachers, students, and parents are overwhelmingly positive. Students made comments such as, "I have more friends," "I like school a little better," and "I know how to handle my problems." Parents responded with comments such as, "He thinks better of himself," "Gives him something to work for," and "He's really trying."

Table 3
First-Year Evaluation Plan for Project Excellence

1st Quarter	*2nd Quarter*	*3rd Quarter*	*4th Quarter*
1. Attendance →			
2. Student Self-Evaluation →			
3. Grades on Assignments/Tests →			
4. Homework Completion →			
5. Class Participation →			
6. Grade Report from Other Classes →			
	7. Rate of Goal Achievement 8. Parent/Teacher Evaluation 9. Comparison Date on: –Neatness/ format of assignment –In-Class task completion –Homework completion –Quality of work on in-class assignment	7. Evaluation of Volunteer Involvement	7. Parent/ Teacher Evaluation 8. Comparison Data on: –Neatness/ format of assignment –In-Class task completion –Homework completion –Quality of work on in-class assignment

Parents also reported that their children have become more involved in friendships and sports and have improved their attitudes toward household chores and homework. Teachers said, "For the first time in one-and-one-half years, student X has completed a mathematical timing," and "more effort being put forth."

Long also reports that attendance has improved. One particular student, for example, has gone from a 10 percent attendance level to a 90 percent attendance level in the last ten weeks.

Encouraged by the initial positive results, the project will be expanded slowly over the next four years. Long would like to see an at-risk specialist at each middle school with three class periods of the program offered for seventh graders and two class periods as followup with eighth graders. Long realizes that Project Excellence "is only scratching the surface. There are still numbers of kids whose needs are not being met. However, I have to work and focus

on what I can do and not spend lots of energy worrying about what isn't being done. All I can do is open some doors."

The High School Approach

The approach of the at-risk program at the high school level is consistent with the mainstream philosophy echoed throughout the district. Through teacher training and staff development, the program focuses on making the regular classroom a more inviting and successful experience for all students. The district also recognizes that some students are experiencing such severe problems by this point that individual intervention is necessary.

The implementation of the high school staff training component is still developmental at this point. After their training is complete, the cadre members at each high school will begin to implement the training program in their buildings. Administrators, however, are already beginning to see changes in attitudes as a result of the district's focus.

Gene Heinle, administrative assistant at Springfield High School, believes "the key to reaching at-risk youth is to provide a learning atmosphere where a student knows that if he or she tries, teachers will recognize their honest effort and adjust the program to ensure their success." Heinle says that teachers already have the instincts to help at-risk youth and need administrative and collegial support to develop the flexibility necessary to give students credit for effort.

The biggest obstacle to recognition of student effort at the high school level is the issue of class standards for grading. Teachers struggle with keeping grades meaningful and yet recognize the varying amounts of effort that different students put forth to succeed. Heinle is encouraged to hear teachers discussing the dilemma; he sees the open discussion of student needs and the concern for recognizing student effort as the first step toward developing the kind of school atmosphere that will enable all students to succeed.

Heinle clearly supports the district focus on raising teachers' awareness of learning styles. High school staff, for example, need to identify the students who find it hard to learn from lectures, he says. Since teachers at the high school level are particularly concerned with and trained in content areas, they may lack training and understanding about differences in the learning styles of students. Once they gain an appreciation for learning styles, these teachers will be better equipped to adjust their instructional styles to provide more opportunities for more students to succeed, says Heinle. His goal is to develop an atmosphere in which teachers are open and willing to develop instructional alternatives for all students.

The district recognizes that a change in the school environment will not be enough to turn around all students who are at risk. There will always be students who have tremendous outside pressures that tragically affect their

lives. To address the needs of students with more serious problems, the district has recently added a half-time intervention specialist at each high school. The intervention specialist works individually with students, many of whom are involved in substance abuse and have multiple problems that require intensive individual attention.

Heinle summarizes the philosophy of the high school at-risk component as follows:

> You shouldn't look to a separate program to meet the needs of at-risk youth. The goal is to create staff attitudes to work with all students in their classrooms. When I see teachers spend a lot of time in the staff room discussing how student X is trying more this year, I feel good.

Heinle is confident Springfield's approach will work.

Conclusion

"School is fun. School is for learning and for games and for students. I like math, reading, and science. School is like an everyday friend."

This paragraph, written by a young Springfield student from an identified at-risk family, perhaps best captures the hopes held by educators who are developing programs for at-risk youth. These educators, concerned about the growing at-risk population, are hoping that all students will experience schools as friendly places with many opportunities for success in learning. Yet the lack of research and guidelines on prevention and intervention strategies for at-risk students presents a challenge to such educators.

In her review of the research, Deborah Strother summarizes the challenge to schools as articulated by Floraline Stevens. Through policy, program development, and fiscal enhancement, schools must address four factors, says Stevens: (1) alienation from teachers, administrators, and peers; (2) poor attendance and high truancy rates, (3) low academic achievement, especially in reading, and (4) negative economic and social pressures at home or in school. In addition, identifying at-risk students before they reach high school is considered essential. Schools must also examine their own policies and processes to make sure they are not discouraging students or inadvertently pushing them out the door.

This Bulletin profiles the comprehensive at-risk program currently being developed in the Springfield School District. It is hoped that the description of Springfield's efforts will be of help to other school districts interested in meeting the needs of their own at-risk students.

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